I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative high schools.

What Are Learning Standards?

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, educators, elected officials, policy makers, and others have been trying to improve the quality of public schools by encouraging or requiring greater consistency in education. In the 1890s, for instance, the so-called Committee of Ten put forward a standard high school course of study that remains largely intact in most schools to this day. In the early twentieth century, the Carnegie unit was introduced, creating a standard definition for the modern course credit, which also remains widely used in schools today. Later on, the "comprehensive high school" became the dominant model for secondary education, and the vast majority of public high schools built in the latter half of the twentieth century followed the same general educational, organizational, and operational template. And the advent of the "standardized test" introduced a new large-scale method to test students consistently across schools, districts, and state lines.

While learning standards are also an attempt to promote greater consistency in education, there is one critically important difference between today's learning standards and many previous attempts to "standardize" education: **learning standards define the *goals* of education—what students need to learn—not the *processes* of education—how schools are structured and how they operate.**

Thousands of high-performing schools across the country and the world have taught us an important lesson: **no two good schools need to look the same**. The most effective schools come in a wide variety of sizes, configurations, and philosophies. But successful college students, skilled and reliable workers, and educated citizens share a specific selection of common attributes: they can read, write, and communicate well; they can think critically and solve problems; they understand math and can use it in their lives; they can comprehend and evaluate basic scientific concepts; they know about economics, American history, and how our government works; and they can use a computer and acquire new technical skills.

When it comes to the fundamental knowledge, skills, and dispositions that our students need to succeed in life, there is no mystery: **some things are just so important that they are simply not optional.** That's where learning standards come in. By establishing clear educational goals—while not telling schools how to meet those goals—standards establish consistency in learning while still allowing for a tremendous amount of flexibility, creativity, and innovation in teaching.

Something to Think About

In his book *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning*, the educator and author Mike Schmoker describes—in alarming detail—the unruly randomness of learning expectations in most schools. Citing decades of studies based on thousands of observations of classroom teaching across the country, Schmoker paints a disturbing picture:

> "What do we see in the vast majority of classrooms? We find startling amounts of busy work, with no connection to important standards or a common curriculum….most of what we see is at odds with good practice."
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> "In most cases, neither teachers nor students can articulate what they are supposed to be learning that day. They can describe only the activity or assignment, which is often chosen because it keeps kids occupied. Irrelevant worksheets and activities often predominate. Catching students learning the most vital reading and writing standards is heartbreakingly rare. And in defiance of what every educator has learned, there is a glaring absence of the most basic elements of an effective lesson."
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> "Robert Marzano points to numerous studies demonstrating that two teachers working with the same socioeconomic population can achieve starkly different results on the same test: in one class, 27 percent of students will pass; in another, 72 percent—a life-changing difference."
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> "David Berliner's team of researchers found that within the same school and grade level, chaos reigns. One teacher taught 28 times as much science as a teacher down the hall, and no one knew this until the researchers went in."
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> "Similarly, a research group investigated which standards were actually taught in hundreds of schools and compared the list against state-assessed standards. There was almost no correspondence. They found redundancy and inconsistency at every grade level; what did get taught was taught down. By 5th grade, most students were being given 2nd and 3rd grade material."

While the findings are alarming, the good news is that Schmoker firmly believes these shortcomings can be quickly and effectively addressed in every state and school. He points out that researchers have already identified one of the biggest problems—a lack of consistent learning standards. "Happily," he writes, "…historic advances can result from acting on what we already know." He also points out that the critical components of effective schools are "not a mystery." He describes one teacher who dramatically improved the reading and writing skills of his students by doing "nothing unusual—nothing any teacher couldn't do or hasn't already learned." The problem, according to Schmoker, is simply that teachers are not using a consistent set of strong learning standards, they are not applying those expectations consistently in their day-to-day teaching, and they are not intentionally and purposefully using the fundamental instructional techniques they have learned or could easily acquire. In Schmoker's view, radically improving student learning won't require schools to do anything radical.

How Learning Standards Work

While standards systems vary in both content and design, most systems—including the Common Core State Standards and the majority of state-required standards throughout the United States—share a lot of common attributes. Perhaps the biggest potential source of confusion, though, is the terminology used to describe certain features of a standards system. While there is a great deal of consistency in design and intention, there is a staggering degree of inconsistency in how various systems are described and presented. While standards systems are generally highly sophisticated, they are nevertheless easy to understand once you get past the technical descriptions and jargon. This section provides a simplified explanation of learning standards and how they work. (Or click **HERE** to download a single-page, ledger-sized graphic of this section.)

Learning standards are adopted by states through a state board or legislative approval process.

Learning Goals

Most standards systems include some form of long-term learning goals—the big important things that students should know and be able to do when they have completed school. These learning goals are the kinds of things that teachers should be thinking about and cultivating in stages throughout a student's educational journey. The basic idea is that at the culmination of pre-adult education—graduation from high school—students will be equipped with the most important knowledge, skills, and personal attributes they will need to succeed in life. **Examples:** *Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them. Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others. Use technology and digital media strategically and capably. Understand other perspectives and cultures.*

Learning Standards

Learning standards are concise, clearly articulated descriptions of what students should know and be able to do at a specific stage of their educational journey. Standards describe learning objectives—that is, where students should be at the end of a course, grade level, or grade span, not the methods that should be used to get them there. The following "College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards," taken from the Common Core State Standards, provide useful examples of standards that have been specifically developed to promote stronger preparation for college, work, and adult life:

Reading: *Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining the technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how word choices shape meaning or tone.*

Writing: *Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.*

Language: *Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing and speaking.*

Content Areas

Learning standards are organized into broad content areas such as English, mathematics, science, social studies, health and wellness, fine and performing arts, etc. Most standards systems use the same general subject-area categories that schools have been using for decades, so they will be quite familiar and understandable to most people. While content-areas standards are specific to an academic discipline, they also reflect the kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that—if taught and cultivated over the course of a student's educational journey—will culminate in high school graduates who embody important long-term learning goals.

Learning Progressions

In each content area, standards are also organized by grade level or grade span—they establish learning expectations for students at a specific age, grade, or stage of learning. There are two important things to know about learning progressions: (1) the standards described at each level specifically address the learning needs and abilities of students at a particular stage of their intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development, and (2) they represent clearly articulated learning sequences—that is, each grade-level standard is purposefully designed to prepare students to meet standards at the next grade level. Learning progressions provide a road map for schools—the basic idea is to make sure that students are not only learning age-appropriate material, but that teachers don't inadvertently repeat material that was taught in earlier grades or teach material that's either too advanced or not advanced enough. The following examples of elementary reading standards show how learning progressions work, and how each standard builds on the previous one, and how they increase in complexity as students advance from one level to the next:

Kindergarten: *Identify the front cover, back cover, and title page of a book.*

First Grade: *Know and use various text features (e.g., headings, tables of contents, glossaries, electronic menus, icons) to locate facts or information in a text.*

Second Grade: Know and use various text features (e.g., captions, bold print, subheadings, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text efficiently.

Third Grade: *Use text features and search tools (e.g., key words, sidebars, hyperlinks) to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently.*

Fourth Grade: *Describe the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in a text or part of a text.*

How Standards Work in Schools

In schools, educators develop systems to connect what is taught in the classroom to the standards that students need to learn, as well as systems that help them track learning progress over time.

Performance Benchmarks

Typically, teachers will develop a system of intermediate or transitional benchmarks—sometimes called *indicators*—that help them gauge learning growth over time. Since students are expected to meet a selection of standards by the end of a course or grade level, teachers use performance benchmarks as a way to evaluate student learning as they progressively work toward meeting a standard. During a yearlong course, for example, teachers will use scored assignments, tests, and other forms of assessing student learning growth and achievement to determine if students are meeting expected benchmarks and moving closer to demonstrating mastery of a learning standard (a process generally called "formative assessment" in education parlance). At the end of a course or at established intervals during a course, teachers may require students to demonstrate in some way—by completing a project, for example—that they have indeed achieved the expectations and acquired the skills described in learning standards.

Performance Descriptors

School leaders and teachers may also create a set of descriptions to guide the evaluation of student performance. While learning standards describe what students need to know and be able to do, performance descriptors define the level or quality of student work, learning acquisition, and skill mastery that needs to be attained to be considered proficient. For example, a common performance-descriptor system might have four tiers: *not proficient*, *partially proficient*, *proficient*, and *advanced*. Schools will develop short descriptions of what students can or can't do at all four levels. Teachers then use these descriptions—typically called "rubrics"—to guide their evaluations of student work and determine which level of proficiency students have achieved. When they have reached proficient or advanced—performance that is typically comparable to B- or A-level work—students are deemed to have "met the standard." Performance standards help schools ensure that teachers are evaluating academic performance in a consistent, comparable, and reliable way—i.e., that the same learning expectations and performance standards are being applied to all students.

Learning Objectives

In some schools, teachers also develop what are sometimes called "learning objectives" or "daily learning targets"—basically, brief descriptions of what the teachers expect students to learn on a given day or during a particular unit of study. Learning objectives are often written on a blackboard or posted on a classroom wall, and they are intended to make lesson expectations completely explicit and clear to students. In effect, they say: *By the end of today's lesson, I expect you to have learned X, Y, and Z*. While similar to learning standards, they are much more specific and narrowly focused—for example, if a writing standard requires students *to produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience*, a learning objective may stipulate that students will learn how to properly use commas, colons, semicolons, and periods, and be able to explain the differences among them. In effect, learning objectives are the component parts of a standard—that is, they are a big-picture standard that has been broken down into a series of progressive steps and digestible chunks. Learning objectives are also a way to make the educational process more transparent and understandable. When students know precisely what they are expected to learn on a given day, it becomes easier for them to focus on those objectives and feel a sense of accomplishment when they have achieved them.

What Are the Common Core State Standards?

When first announced in 2009, the Common Core State Standards were met with—and still continue to be haunted by—a fair amount of apprehension and misunderstanding. Some worried that the federal government was trying to nationalize what is taught in public schools (not true), while others worried that teachers would be forced to teach in rigidly prescriptive ways (also not true). Still others worried that the content and quality of the standards wouldn't be strong (a valid concern before the actual standards were created), while some felt that a new set of learning standards simply wouldn't change schools for the better (to be determined). There are many arguments that could be put forward in response to these concerns, but perhaps the best and surest way to cut through all the *talk* about the Common Core State Standards is to actually sit down and read them. After a few minutes, it's likely that any apprehension will evaporate. The standards are easy to understand and they reflect straightforward, commonsense learning expectations that few educators, parents, college professors, employers, or elected officials would not see as vitally important for students to learn. The Common Core State Standards are simply an attempt to keep schools focused on teaching—and making sure students learn—the most important knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to succeed in life. Even if they are not perfect, they are a solid place to start if the goal is prepare our young people to succeed in college, thrive in their careers, and lead lives of active, engaged citizenship.

Here are a few important things to know about the Common Core State Standards:

1. The standards were developed by a committee of educators, content experts, researchers, and representatives of national education organizations, and the final versions reflect feedback received from the general public, teachers, parents, business leaders, states, and content-area experts. In other words, they represent a pretty strong consensus about what matters most—at least as much of a consensus as anyone is likely to achieve on an issue as emotionally charged as learning expectations for students.
2. The standards were also informed by (a) the learning standards used in countries throughout the world with relatively high-performing education systems, (b) the standards already in place throughout the United States, and (c) college and workforce expectations—that is, what students will need to know and be able to do to succeed in higher education and modern careers. The research and evidence supporting the standards is, again, as solid as anyone is likely to see in a set of learning standards.
3. While states were incentivized to adopt the Common Core if they chose to apply for Race to the Top funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (to be eligible for a grant, states had to agree to adopt "internationally benchmarked standards"), all the states that adopted the standards did so voluntarily. The process for adoption requires state board or legislative approval, so the standards were adopted in the same manner that state regulations are created and laws are passed.

The following section—*What Is Not Covered in the Standards*—is taken from the introduction to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, and it provides a solid overview of what the standards are and what they are not. For more detailed summary information on what's in the Common Core State Standards, we also recommend reading **Key Points in English Language Arts** and **Key Points in Mathematics**.

What Is Not Covered by the Standards

The Standards should be recognized for what they are not as well as what they are. The most important intentional design limitations are as follows:

1. The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach. For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the

Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document. Furthermore, while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.

2. While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught. A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers. The aim of the Standards is to articulate the fundamentals, not to set out an exhaustive list or a set of restrictions that limits what can be taught beyond what is specified herein.
3. The Standards do not define the nature of advanced work for students who meet the Standards prior to the end of high school. For those students, advanced work in such areas as literature, composition, language, and journalism should be available. This work should provide the next logical step up from the college and career readiness baseline established here.
4. The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations. No set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom. However, the Standards do provide clear signposts along the way to the goal of college and career readiness for all students.
5. It is also beyond the scope of the Standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs. At the same time, all students must have the opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-high school lives.

   Each grade will include students who are still acquiring English. For those students, it is possible to meet the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening without displaying native-like control of conventions and vocabulary.

   The Standards should also be read as allowing for the widest possible range of students to participate fully from the outset and as permitting appropriate accommodations to ensure maximum participation of students with special education needs. For example, for students with disabilities *reading* should allow for the use of Braille, screen-reader technology, or other assistive devices, while *writing* should include the use of a scribe, computer, or speech-to- text technology. In a similar vein, *speaking* and *listening* should be interpreted broadly to include sign language.
6. While the ELA and content area literacy components described herein are critical to college and career readiness, they do not define the whole of such readiness. Students require a wide-ranging, rigorous academic preparation and, particularly in the early grades, attention to such matters as social, emotional, and physical development and approaches to learning. Similarly, the Standards define literacy expectations in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, but literacy standards in other areas, such as mathematics and health education, modeled on those in this document are strongly encouraged to facilitate a comprehensive, schoolwide literacy program.

Still Want to Know More?

If you are interested in the foundational research behind many of the ideas discussed in the Leadership in Action series, we recommend our Global Best Practices Research Summary, which is available on the New England Secondary School Consortium website.